

an excellent joke, by the way.) Michael's newly acquired background and capabilities make him the only logical choice to negotiate with this most sinister entity, but he must also neutralize the upstart Isomage, sorely wounded and bitterly resentful of the pasting he took at the climax to the first part.

Greg Bear's imagination never deserts him as he works towards the climax, and nor does his vision of Michael, still a young man, permanently scared stiff of his own potential no less than that of his opponents, and, throughout the book, always looking for the sort of affection that is the proper concern of a young man. Altogether, this is a brilliantly conceived and executed novel, and I was greatly surprised to learn that in conception it was also Greg Bear's first.

My single grouse against the publisher is that the second half is full of ugly interpolations explaining to the reader references to the first half, a relic of the book's former condition as two volumes sold separately. Even then they were deplorable; no one has any business reading *The Serpent Mage* without reading *The Infinity Concerto* first, and now would have been a splendid opportunity to cut them; I'm sorry it hasn't been taken up.

(Chris Gilmore)

Juke Book Jury Jones & McIntosh

No, sf anthologies don't have to have a theme to sell, but presumably it helps, because "concept" collections keep on appearing. Latest in this sometimes illustrious (but not always) line is **In Dreams** (Gollancz, £4.99) edited by Paul McAuley and Kim Newman, and this time the concept is daringly specific. This is "the anthology of the 45 – a celebration of the 7-inch single." Hmm. Specific and ambitious.

The marketing angle on this one is shrewd. The CD rules, and the vinyl record is going the way of the buffalo but there are a lot of folk who mourn the passing of the 45 and its LP cousin. Aim an anthology at them and you can hope to pull in not just the sf-committed but many more punters besides. Of course, there's still that irritating little problem common to all original anthologies: where on earth are you going to find 27 brand-new stories that meet your editorial requirements? (And in this case this means hitting the bullseye at the centre of a 7-inch single spinning at 45 rpm.) The standard editorial answer to this question is, ring round the usual crew, see what they turn in, and then go with whatever you've got. With *In Dreams* that

means (mostly) some better-than-average stories but also an anthology which is a much broader-band celebration of music than the blurb promises – in fact a collection of sf, fantasy and horror stories with (mostly) a rock n' roll backdrop. Even so, it's a varied mix of stories that are rarely less than readable and often very rewarding.

Ian McDonald heads the book, something that almost seems mandatory with a British sf anthology these days. Normally this would be good news, but this McDonald story – or at very least its lead-off position – seems misplaced. Because if *In Dreams* is the world of rock 'n roll, then "Fat Tuesday" is the rock video, all slippery, shimmering images and very little substance – of course the prose portrait of a nasty near-future Rio is about as impressive as you'd expect, but the story itself is both thin and overwrought. Fortunately, thereafter the stories settle down and come on strong. "The Discovery of Running Bare" by Jonathan Carroll, apparently slight at first reading, manages to draw out of its slender threads an evocative piece about the unwitting shattering of dreams in small-town America. "Night Shift Sister" is an excellent example of the work of Nicholas Royle, a fine balance of surrealism and gritty, everyday urban hell. "Sticks" by Lewis Shiner scores with its persuasive depiction of obsession and recording studios. "Nyro Fiddles" by F. Paul Wilson seems at first no story at all – just a rather prosaic detailing of a recording session towards the end of the 60s. But Wilson captures and records a sense of a frozen moment in time that lingers in the memory and makes the story rather more than the sum of its parts. By contrast, "Digital to Analogue" by Alistair Reynolds is very much a horror story, and a genuinely scary one at that, as the narrator, on his way home from a rave, finds himself sucked into a very bad trip indeed. In our opinion, easily Reynolds's best story to date.

There are some surprises as well. Who would have had Stephen Baxter tagged for a closet Glenn Miller fan, for instance? "Weep for the Moon" reveals his knowledge of the bandleader to be verging on the encyclopedic. Somewhat off-centre from his usual hard-sf terrain, but still a very enjoyable read. "Bold as Love" finds Gwyneth Jones also well away from her usual haunts, in a post-punk virtual-reality nightclub explored in extravagant and compelling detail.

"Life in the Groove," on the other hand, is surprising only if you're not familiar with the work of Ian Watson, in which case it's probably completely mindblowing, an sf interpretation of the vinyl record which manages both to be very literal and yet totally off the wall. Imagine a entire world – entire civilizations, strung out along an

endless vinyl Grand Canyon, literally "in the groove." Like much of Watson's writing you'll either love or loathe it – we divided each way on this one – but he has to rate as one of sf's most inventive minds.

Of the remainder of the stories there are quite a few which make for satisfying reads as well as some which just don't work. Of the latter we'd have to single out Colin Greenland's routine "Candy Comes Back" and Lisa Tuttle's "Honey, I'm Home!", a laboured TV-becomes-real tale where the ending is telegraphed a long way before it comes and so is doubly unsatisfying. It's also a story which, so far as we could tell, has absolutely zero bearing on the music scene, let alone the 7-inch single, and therefore there is no convincing reason for its inclusion here. Equally tangential is "The Reflection Once Removed" by Scott Bradfield, which is slight but smoothly told.

However, most of the stories more than earn their shelf space, and the best is saved until last. In his introduction, veteran rock commentator Charles Shaar Murray remembers some of the great rock 'n roll crossover sf stories, amongst them, quite rightly, Bruce Sterling's "Dori Bangs." Ian R. MacLeod's improbably titled "Snodgrass" is "Dori Bangs" revisited, and that's meant as a compliment to both stories. But whereas "Dori Bangs" chronicled the might-have-been life of American rock writer Lester Bangs, MacLeod's story lifts John Lennon out of this world and puts him back in a life where no assassin's bullet awaits him because – well, read the story. Suffice to say that "Snodgrass," like "Dori Bangs," is funny, moving and sad, and written with a command of detail and character which confirms that Ian MacLeod is developing into one of Britain's strongest short-story writers, sf or otherwise.

The one thing that the book surely lacks (well, two things actually) is a story each from editors Newman and McAuley, both of whom might have been expected to deliver the full 7" goods on current form. Still, it scores as a pleasing, value-for-money collection with more hits than misses. Enough hits, indeed, to make it one of the stronger British original anthologies to be published in recent years. Ignore the hype, read the stories, and you won't go too far wrong with this – if you'll pardon the expression – sound anthology.

(Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh)

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I could tell by the way she walked that her muscles would feel tight under her skin, coiled, ready. Pre-performance nerves.

By now, red glowed on six of the seven barrels. Nadia leaned, flicked the switch on the last one and stepped to the middle of the circle. Her feet were bare. She wore the same dusty black as the second time she'd come to Talulah's, and no jewellery. Her hair was longer than I was used to seeing it, and she looked tired and tense: maybe it was she who was being assessed, not the machines.

She raised her arms. The light in the studio dimmed, and each of the seven barrels suddenly splayed dozens, hundreds of ribbons of light up and out, like straight-line fountain water. At first it looked like white light, but it wasn't, not quite. One barrel poured with ivory, another with sepia, a third shimmered like a heat haze over sand.

Nadia stayed immobile, in the exact centre of the ring, black clothes untouched by light. She was smiling faintly, her skin sheened with sweat, breathing even; not nervous now, just ready.

I'd never seen anyone move like Nadia did. One moment she was standing there as if she'd been carved from wood a hundred years dead, the next she leapt away in a twirling half turn, slashing her arms down through several beams of different coloured light, flick flick flick, faster than I could follow, making music. Every time her hair, or a fingertip or a crease of her clothes, the heel of her left foot or the thrust of a knee or hip went through light, there was a sound. Nadia kept moving, and the music poured from the barrels: tubular bells and violas, french horns and African drums: sampled music, like a light-operated Fairlight Series IV. Only instead of taking sampled and digitally stored music that had already been programmed into coherent sequences and then manipulating the waveform using a light pen, she was doing it all simultaneously, with her body, using dance to make music. It was like watching a shuttle liftoff: impossible, but happening right before your eyes.

It was fast music, sun-on-dragonfly music; music like the thousand and one nodding flowers in a field and the flyers and burrowers that played above and below ground. Light-hearted music, but complex, with the rhythms of life and death: computer-aided Grieg, or Camel with violins; marvellous music, intoxicating. And creating it, spinning in it, sweat flying from her skin and making its own little music, was Nadia: charcoal tunic and trousers stained black in patches, hair slicked down to her scalp and half-smile gone, replaced by utter concentration. I could see and hear the work going into the music: muscles bunched and stretched, her bare feet thumped on the boards, breath whistled. For a few seconds, half a minute maybe, she hit her groove, and the dancing and music came together in a perfect, symbiotic pattern. Her sheened arms slid and swam through the light like fish, faster, faster, and the bass and treble, the horns and strings and woodwind all fitted together in an intricate jigsaw making me laugh out loud at the wonder of it. But then she put a foot too far forward and the cello sound faltered, and the synergy of movement and sound was lost; once again, it was just a woman dancing beautifully, making marvellous music.

The screen blanked, cutting off picture and sound mid-bar.

I blinked, took a shaky breath. So that was LAOM dancing. I picked up the remote, waiting to watch it all again, in slow motion, but the screen flicked white again. More?

This time the lettering came up first: *Day 163, Performance, Mark III Kyoto-TEC LAOM's*. Five or six months later, then. And this time they had a real camera operator on the job: a pan shot of the LAOM's first, eight of them now, seven arranged in a squashed-looking circle, the eighth off-centre. They weren't the crude things of the *Day 2*, either: these were beautifully finished machines, wooden cases gleaming with soft polish, plates made of burnished high-tensile alloys.

Nadia stood, ready: not the tired, tense woman-under-trial of *Day 2*, but a different Nadia.

She was wearing arterial red; there were long feathers hanging from one ear, and the fingers of both hands were tipped with razorblade extensions of dull grey metal. Around her right ankle was a thick ring with a spike on the outside. The quality of her waiting was different, too: not an absence, but a presence. She brooded, like a caged animal, like a storm building on the horizon; a creature of brass and blood. I expected her to slide back her lips from red teeth and hiss.

The LAOM's suddenly spread their fingers of light – jungle colours this time, purples and golds and turquoise – like exotic pineapples sprouting spikes of virulent greenery. Nadia moved her head, letting the feather in her left ear swing out and touch a turquoise ribbon: a parrot cawed. She moved her head again; the parrot screamed over the thumping start of a deep heartbeat. The camera pulled back its focus: Nadia's foot was tapping deliberately, the spike cutting back and forth through a low gold stream of light. Then she turned, fast as a panther stalking, and the music came pouring forth.

It was murder music, heat-and-sex music, and Nadia was leaping, whirling, sliding and tricking her way through those thousands of frozen Roman-candle lights. She never once missed the heartbeat. Wherever she was, at whatever speed, that footspike came down dead on the beat, every time, over and over.

I could hardly breathe.

She reached and sliced through hot ruby and hummingbird blue with her metal-tipped fingers, and the ribbons of light from two LAOM's began to rotate. She moved faster and faster, but, paradoxically, everything seemed to slow down, become perfectly defined. Each note, each layer of music was absolutely separate from the rest; each beat seemed to have all the time in the world to swell and crest and ebb, then swell and sound again. My heart was thumping and I wanted to shout, or scream, or die. I felt on the edge of something profound.

And the sound and the dance built, and Nadia's ankle spike never missed a beat, only now she was using her fingertips and her feathers and the flick and swirl of her diaphanous trousers to create counter beats, and rhythm upon rhythm upon rhythm.

It was only when the screen blanked again, releasing me, that I found I was crushing the remote control in my hands, bruising my palms; that I was able to